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Chou En-lai and the Cultural Revolution

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CHOU EN-LAI AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Premier Chou En-lai has been a key member of the triumvirate that has ruled in Peking since August 1966, and his behavior during the period suggests that he is the only reasonable man left at the top of the political heap in China. He has reached his key position after decades of savage struggle and subtle compromise. Chou has had more experience in the outside world than any other Chinese leader. By temperament more an administrator than a theoretician, he is a suave, urbane pragmatist who has proved his competence and durability in more than 40 years of service to Chinese Communism.

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, all regime propaganda portrayed Chou as loyally supporting and operating on behalf of Mao Tse-tung and Lin Piao. In fact, however, Chou has persistently worked to moderate extreme policies ordered by his superiors and at times has even seemed to be working at cross-purposes. Although not entirely in step with the Maoists, Chou appears publicly as the most active member of the leadership and has even taken on some of the ceremonial duties of the chief-of-state role. Capable of being all things to all men, and possessed of unrivalled political skill, Chou--of all those at the top of the power structure--has the best prospect to survive in authority.

Chou's Character and Background

Since August 1966, Chou En-lai has appeared to be firmly entrenched as the number three man in China, a ranking he had held for years. At the eight mass rallies last fall and in all similar turnouts of the leadership this year, he has been consistently ranked directly after Mao and his heir apparent, Lin Piao. Chou's prominence derives in large

part from his position at the summit of China's huge government structure and from his role as chief spokesman for the regime's policies. As premier, Chou implements policies that have been decided upon in the inner councils of the regime where his voice unquestionably carries great weight.

Chou's characteristically practical attitude toward problems is legendary. Soviet officials,

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for example, have said they would rather deal with Chou than almost any other Chinese leader, because they consider him more flexible and intelligent. He has demonstrated an uncanny knack for emerging on the right side of issues and riding out crises. In his ability to survive in the jungle of intraparty politics, he has been likened to Mikoyan. Time and again he has been called on to undertake delicate negotiations and to rationalize embarrassing policy retreats. While many of his colleagues in Peking are rigid and often press for extreme measures, Chou almost invariably emerges as the exponent of the possible.

Inside China, Chou is a much-admired and popular figure, and he has long been Peking's best salesman with foreigners.

His experience in the Western world has given him a broader, more cosmopolitan outlook than that possessed by any other Chinese Communist leader. When he chooses, Chou can be sociable, affable, and informal, and is not above enjoying a stiff drink on occasion--a display of humanity his more wooden colleagues would not dare to permit themselves.

He has always been somewhat of an anomaly in Mao's entourage. He was born into a well-to-do east China Mandarin family and

was steeped in the tradition of Confucianism--in contrast to other Chinese Communist leaders, most of whom spring from more humble beginnings. At the age of 15, Chou entered a secondary school in Tientsin sponsored by American missionaries and, upon graduation in 1917, studied in Japan and later in Germany and France--where he also worked as a miner and factory laborer. While in France, he associated with several other men who also rose to the top ranks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in later years.

Back in China, Chou became involved in patriotic student agitation--along with his future wife--and both were imprisoned in Tientsin in 1919-20. In 1925-26, during the period of the Kuomintang (KMT) - CCP entente, Chou was acting director of the political department at Whampoa Military Academy, China's West Point. Later he served as a capable army commander. In the early 1930s, he supported two of Mao's rivals for the leadership of the CCP, not joining Mao's camp until after Mao had seized control of the party at the Tsunyi Conference which took place early in the course of the Long March. For the remainder of this ordeal, Chou proved his usefulness to Mao and he played a key role during the period of exile in Yen-an.

During the war years Chou handled contacts with the Americans in Chungking and later served as chief negotiator for the Communists in dealing with the KMT and the US in 1945-46. In 1949-50

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he had a leading role in the hard bargaining that eventually produced the Sino-Soviet Mutual Defense Treaty. Chou was the central figure on the Chinese side in the talks that led to the Korean and Vietnamese settlements of 1953-54.

In all of these negotiations, Chou proved to be tough, careful, and patient. He scored what was probably his biggest international public relations success with his brilliant performance at the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955. Beneath his skillfully projected exterior of reason and

pragmatism, however, Chou is probably as ruthless as any of his colleagues. This has been amply demonstrated by his survival through three decades of service in his precarious post so near the summit of power in the CCP. Chou has served as China's premier since establishment of the regime in 1949 and was concurrently foreign minister until 1958.

Chou En-lai's Official Status

Chou has for years followed a bone-crushing schedule of official duties that would tax the energy and constitution of many



Waving their little red "Quotations from Chairman Mao," Communist China's present No. 2 and No. 3 men, Lin Piao and Chou En-lai, lead Cultural Revolution officials to the podium to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Chairman Mao's "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," 23 April 1967.

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younger men; a typical work day runs from 11:00 a.m. until two or three the next morning. These duties include frequent ceremonial appearances, the management of China's huge government machinery in ever-increasing detail, and a prime public (and doubtlessly behind-the-scenes) role in the Cultural Revolution. During the course of the Cultural Revolution, moreover, additional responsibility has devolved on him almost by default, for he is the only one of the ruling triumvirate with sufficient vigor to engage in the day-to-day direction of the gigantic government machinery.

The evident importance of these activities has led some observers to judge that his political stature is growing.

This probably reflects a widespread view in the Chinese foreign service, not untinged by wishful thinking. Similar views had been expressed by Chinese officials overseas as far back as October. British diplomats in Peking have judged that, despite the persistent attacks on men identified with Chou, the premier was holding on with a fair degree of confidence, and continuing his efforts to impose order on the social turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.

Chou's formal ranking as number three in the ruling triumvirate has been reinforced on countless occasions in the propaganda treatment of leadership

gatherings. He has appeared at each turnout of the elite inner circle in the last several months, always listed just after Mao and Lin when they are present (the protocol established in August 1966), or heading the group in their absence. In recent months when Lin has appeared in public without Mao, Chou has been at his elbow--most recently at a rally on 25 July.

Chou appears to be taking on additional formal functions. When Peking was indicating its support of the Arab nations during the recent Middle East crisis, Premier Chou not only spoke for the nation and government, but received correspondence from Arab leaders. On 27 May, Foreign Minister Chen Yi received diplomatic representatives from six Arab nations and the Palestine Liberation Organization "on behalf of Chou En-lai." Again, during the state visit of Zambia's President Kaunda to China on 20-24 June, Chou appeared to occupy the roles of both chief of government and chief of state, as does Kaunda. He greeted, wined, and dined Kaunda, held summit talks with him, gave speeches on the occasion, and presided at the signing of a trade agreement. Since Peking has made no attempt to provide an alternate stand-in for the denigrated Liu Shao-chi, foreign diplomats in Peking have been led to assume that Chou is now acting as Peking's chief of state, adding one more time-consuming job.

As if this were not enough, there have been several reports since January that Chou has taken

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on part of the day-to-day administrative duties of those of his subordinate officials on the State Council who are now in trouble with the inquisitors of the Cultural Revolution. In a major unpublished speech on 30 April, Chou stated that he had assumed direct management of the state offices for foreign affairs, for finance and trade, and for agriculture and forestry, thus filling in for the beleaguered Chen Yi, Li Hsien-nien, and Tan Chen-lin.

Chou's Role in the Cultural Revolution

In addition to his full-time formal functions, Chou has been pictured in poster reports as serving as chief executive officer for the Cultural Revolution, ordering military actions, cajoling revolutionary rebels to accept guidance, setting down policy, and negotiating agreements between contending factions--all this professedly in compliance with the policies of Mao and Lin. In his role of Cultural Revolution trouble shooter, Chou has personally met numerous delegations from the provinces, and several central committee decisions or directives endorsing or criticizing provincial leaders have been issued in his name.

Chou's policy statements have fairly constantly supported the more rational options, such as the three-way alliances to end dissension and restore order, calls for the reopening of schools this summer to absorb restless youth, and statements concerning

central committee approval for moderate economic policies to protect industrial and agricultural production. Both his public and private speeches have often been treated as major statements of Cultural Revolution policy.

After the collapse of the provincial party machinery in January 1967, it was Chou's task to try to keep the government machinery intact in the large majority of provinces where the Maoists were unable to form acceptable "revolutionary" governments. Chou's authority in dealing with the new leaders, mainly local military commanders, was undercut in April, however, when several arrangements he had made were contested by Maoist militants and overturned by the central committee. Also, in May and June, radical Maoist leaders such as Kang Sheng, Chen Po-ta, and Madame Mao for the first time began to be publicly associated with the settlement of some provincial problems.

Chou remained very active in provincial affairs, however. In April he flew to Canton to endorse leaders of the Canton Military Region who had been criticized by Maoists for supporting "conservative" groups. As disorders spread in Kwangtung and Hunan provinces--both in the jurisdiction of the Canton Military Region--Chou personally intervened. In late July he ordered the 47th Army to take control of Hunan away from the Hunan Military District, and several times during August Chou issued orders

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to Red Guard groups and local military authorities in the Canton area in unsuccessful attempts to stem the spread of violence. Chou's most dramatic trouble-shooting act in the post-April turmoil was to arrange the release of two high officials who were being detained in Wuhan by the local military commander.

Attacks on Chou En-lai

In the early months of the Cultural Revolution, Chou and the men working for him in the government machinery were left strictly alone by Maoist leaders and Red Guards, who were then concentrating their fire on leaders in the party apparatus. Soon after a crucial high-level meeting in Peking in October, however, Red Guard groups launched a major onslaught against vice premiers and government ministry officials. During late October and early November the Guards broke into government buildings, paraded and manhandled many officials--at least one minister died at their hands--and plastered the capital with vicious poster attacks on protégés of Chou. Chou himself did not become a major target, but the sudden attack on his personal base of power strongly suggested that he had clashed with Maoist leaders at the October meeting.

Attacks on government, as distinct from party, officials were renewed in the first two weeks of January, but subsided quickly when Chou, seconded by Madame Mao and Cultural Revolution Group head Chen Po-ta,

spoke out strongly at Red Guard rallies in defense of the vice premiers under attack; Madame Mao and Chen also used the occasion to praise Chou. Once again, the episode suggested that Chou had incurred the wrath of the Maoists but had weathered the storm because they were convinced that he was needed to hold the country together. Chou was almost certainly the architect of the moderate policies pursued by the regime in late January and February, a period when his prestige and authority seemed to be exceptionally great.

By March, however, the Maoists realized that the Cultural Revolution to which they were committed was losing its steam, and they decided to open the throttle wide again, regardless of the cost. This decision, reached at reportedly stormy meetings of the politburo standing committee during the first two weeks of March, was immediately followed by heavy and sustained Red Guard attacks, through posters and rallies, on policies associated primarily with Chou's name, and on men who worked for him.

As in earlier periods, the Maoists avoided launching direct attacks on Chou himself, but the existence of a concealed threat to Chou's position has been reflected in staunch defenses of him against unidentified attackers. A poster put up by the powerful Peking Aviation Institute Red Guards on 18 March stated that Chou "is Chairman Mao's close comrade-in-arms....Bombarding

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Chou En-lai is the same as bombarding the proletarian headquarters, the same as opposing the revolution." Similar defenses have often been publicized in major Red Guard newspapers.

A poster of 31 May reported a more high-powered defense. According to this account, Chen Po-ta and three other top Cultural Revolution leaders met with Red Guard representatives and critics of Chou, and told them not to criticize him. Chen Po-ta said, "Chou is respected abroad as well as at home....He is a responsible person who is carrying out the policies of Chairman Mao and Vice Chairman Lin. Nobody is allowed to find fault with him."

Chou's Defense of His Allies

Chou has repeatedly come to the public defense of his own associates who have been under sporadic criticism for many months, and this has undoubtedly contributed to the ire of his antagonists.

On 20 May, for example, he told a conference that Marshal Yeh Chien-ying was loyal to Mao, and "good for the most part," that he had performed signal services for Mao up through 1966, and had made mistakes in Szechwan and Tsinghai early this year (when he reportedly backed the PLA's suppression of rebel violence) only because he had been misled by reports from lower organizations. Moreover, Chou openly defended Li Hsien-nien, the finance minister, on 11 June,

as he had done implicitly at a meeting on 6 April.

The official for whom Chou has accepted the greatest political risk, however, has been Foreign Minister Chen Yi. According to pamphlets passed out on 12 June by Red Guards at the No. 2 Foreign Languages Institute, Chou presided at a rally of 10,000 on 24 January at which Chen Yi made a public self-criticism. Chou immediately characterized this self-abasement as "exceedingly good," apparently trying by this means to end the vitriolic public campaign against Chen Yi. When it resumed with greater ferocity in March and April, Chou again rose to the defense.

Subsequently, Chou has on three occasions faced down Red Guard "rebels" from the Foreign Language Institute and other organizations connected with foreign affairs--twice following unruly mob "invasions" of buildings of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Angrily rebuking the Guards for breaking into the offices, Chou refused their demands for the ouster of Chen and other officials and bluntly told them that they were "not the politburo. Don't try to pressure me. That is quite unacceptable."

Most recently, according to news posted by rebels in the 7th Ministry of Machine Building, which oversees missile production, Chou received a group of rebels on 1 June and criticized a rival rebel group from the 7th Ministry for having attacked Nieh Jung-chen,

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until recently in over-all charge of advanced weapons development. Chou then took this occasion to extend his protection to all vice chairmen of the Military Affairs Committee, vice premiers, and politburo members by objecting to all poster criticism of this group.

Chou and the Wuhan Incident

New efforts by the Maoists to accelerate the Cultural Revolution during July resulted in a gesture of open defiance of Peking by the commander of the strategic Wuhan Military Region. Chou was deeply involved in this unprecedented and complicated problem.

Another drive against the discredited Liu Shao-chi had been launched just before the middle of July. Official broadcasts explained that this was necessary because Liu still had "henchmen" in nearly every sector of society--including the army--who must be brought down. At the same time, the Red Guards were given new encouragement to press ahead with their destructive revolutionary campaign. In short, officials at the center and in the provinces who had survived earlier attacks were confronted with a new personal threat--in the midst of spreading disorder and violence which promised to develop into ruinous chaos.

The Wuhan commander responded by seizing and humiliating two key officials sent out from Pe-

king. This was probably intended as a gesture of protest against the Cultural Revolution rather than an attempt to raise the flag of rebellion. It was an unprecedented challenge of the most serious sort, however, and may have marked a definitive turning point in the course of China's internal political struggle.

A strong central authority and a united leadership would have reacted by immediately removing the defiant official and making a public example of him. Peking did neither. It was more than two weeks before the dismissal of the Wuhan commander was announced and no further punishment for him was publicized. The circumstances suggest that the reason for this failure to deal promptly and "decisively" with the situation in Wuhan resulted from pressure brought to bear by other key regional military leaders.

Chou was apparently instrumental in obtaining the release of the two detained officials and probably had a major, if not primary, role in negotiations between Maoists and the military concerning a solution. In this, he was supporting Mao and Lin, but he probably attempted at the same time to maintain ties and influence with those opposing them. The result of the bargaining was a compromise--unsatisfactory to all parties concerned--which was soon followed by a new and more violent phase of the struggle.

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Chou's Current Position and Prospects

Chou's toughness, caution, and willingness to use the knife when necessary have served him well in the vicious infighting that has been part of the Cultural Revolution from the outset. Throughout this period of officially encouraged violence and disorder, Chou has consistently been the spokesman for moderation. He has repeatedly defended like-minded adherents and allies within the bureaucracy and military establishment.

Chou's ability to appear occasionally out of step with the Cultural Revolution in some respects while retaining a position

close to the top of the political hierarchy is a reflection both of his adroitness and of the fact that he is as close to being the indispensable man as any official in China today. Because he has not been identified with the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution, Chou is probably the only high-ranking official still in a position to talk with all groups engaged in the current struggle for supremacy. Barring a collapse of central authority and a descent into civil war that destroys the Communist regime entirely, Chou can be expected to end up in a position at or near the top of the political hierarchy that eventually emerges from the current turmoil.

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